

## I'll Walk With You by urdearestmom

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Anyways, Gen, I finally did it, a little lumax interaction and a LOT of mentions of lucas, but this is madwheeler centric, god i feel so satisfied posting this, i NEED them to be friends ffs, kind of max centric maybe?, there are only SOME mentions of mileven

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler

**Relationships:** Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2021-03-09

**Updated:** 2021-03-09

**Packaged:** 2022-04-01 18:09:16

**Rating:** General Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 5,797

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

Damn Lucas for putting the idea in her head. She's sure she never would've considered it on her own. Damn Lucas and his stupid advice, damn Dustin for ever speaking to her that day and getting her involved in all their mess, and damn Mike for hating her from day one.

# I'll Walk With You

## Author's Note:

hello everyone shocked to see me posting yet again???????

i said after i posted that oneshot rehashing 3x06 that i was going to one day write something where mike and max have an actual conversation.... and here it is!! for your reading pleasure :)

i think i did them and their dynamic justice with this and i'm super proud of how it turned out. we're unlikely to ever get something like this in the show but i'm hoping s4 at least gives us them being actual friends so that i can infer that something like this happened between seasons lol

Max's house is silent as the grave. She isn't surprised, it's been like this nearly all the time since the summer. Her stepfather will drink himself back to sleep on the couch, and her mother will say nothing. Max won't say anything either. The day has barely begun and it's already shit.

Most of the time she escapes the horrible atmosphere inside her house by going to school, but it's Spring Break now and she has nowhere to be. She'll be stuck with her thoughts all day if she doesn't find something else to do, so after nearly two hours of trying in vain to entertain herself, she decides to head out and see if Lucas is free. She knows Dustin already left town with his mom the night before, and she's not willing to have Mike third wheel her and Lucas, so she hopes he's down to go do something with her. He's good at distracting her from the inescapable cycle of guilt and anger she feels constantly nowadays.

Except when she gets to his house, his parents are in the garage putting things into the trunk of the family car. She stops at the sight. Erica is nowhere to be seen but Lucas is standing in the front doorway and sees Max coming right away. He meets her in the street.

“Max, hey,” he says. “What’s up?”

Max gestures to his house. “I came to see if you wanted to hang out, but it looks like you guys are going somewhere.”

Lucas frowns. “I thought I told you, we’re going to visit my cousins in Chicago for a few days.”

Lord, a few *days*? Lucas must see it on her face because he scrambles to assure her it’s not for the whole week.

“I’ll be back Wednesday,” he promises.

“Today’s Sunday,” she protests. She knows there’s literally nothing to be done about it, but it still sucks. What’s she going to do all week?

“I swear I told you,” Lucas repeats.

“Yeah. Yeah,” Max answers. “You probably did. I’m sorry, just... forgot.”

He frowns again. Max has been forgetting a lot of things lately. She’s not sure why, it just feels like everything in her life is too much and her brain can’t handle it the way it should. Freshman year has not been the greatest so far.

“You okay?” He asks her, reaching for her hands, and his concern makes her heart squeeze painfully in her chest. He’s probably the only person who actually cares about her well-being, seeing as her mom clearly doesn’t.

Max nods. “Yeah. I just didn’t want to be at home, but I guess I’ll find something else to do. Bye, Lucas,” she says, squeezing his fingers gratefully before turning away to bike off back down the street.

“Hey!” He calls. She turns back. He motions to the big house next door, equally familiar to her. “Mike’s still home, maybe you can ask him?”

Max crosses her arms. “Like *he* would want to hang out with me,” she scoffs.

Lucas sighs. "Look, I know he can be a bit of an ass sometimes-"

"That's putting it lightly."

"-But he's not a bad person, Max, you know that. He's dealing with a lot right now," Lucas finishes.

Max rolls her eyes. "Yeah, well, he's not the only one," she says biting. She has never gotten along with the third boy in their group and at this point she isn't sure she ever will. She's also not really in the mood to look at his stupid face today, considering it'll more than likely start an argument and she doesn't have the energy for that.

"I *know* ," Lucas says. "I know. But you're both my best friends and I think you guys are more alike than you think. If you just gave each other another chance, you'd get along."

Max doesn't reply. She doesn't really know what to say because she knows Lucas is only trying to help her with what he thinks is the current best solution, but she doesn't want to agree with him either.

"Just think about it," he continues. "He's the only one not going anywhere so if you really need to see someone..."

She gets what Lucas is implying, but *really*? "He'd probably laugh in my face if I showed up at the door. I'd rather stay home."

At that, Lucas raises his arms in surrender. "I'm just saying he wouldn't turn you away. We don't lie to each other, alright?"

Max shrugs in response. "Whatever. I'll figure something out."

Lucas steps forward quickly to hug her. Pulling back, he keeps his hands on her arms. "I wrote my cousins' phone number on the back of your math worksheet yesterday if you need it."

She gives him a tiny nod and he returns it with a small smile, dropping his arms back to his sides.

"I'll see you first thing Thursday morning," he adds.

"Thursday," she repeats, putting one foot back on her bike pedal.

“Got it.” What’s she supposed to do until Thursday?

The answer, as it happens, is absolutely nothing. For the rest of Sunday afternoon, Max rides around town with no destination. She stops in a park for a while, sitting down and pulling up blades of grass and sprinkling them around her. A man walking his dog gives her a weird look and she flips the bird at his back. That action feels oddly satisfying, even if he didn’t see it. In the evening she makes her way back to her house, and everyone pretends like she didn’t just spend the entire day gone.

Monday dawns looking and feeling exactly the same, except Max decides to get a start on some homework. This way when Lucas comes back she’ll be free to hang out with him without the thought of her assignments hanging over her head. Her mom leaves to go to work and all it does is make Max hyper aware of Neil’s movements across the house. He’s supposed to go to work too, but Max isn’t sure he will. In fact, she sort of suspects he’s either quit or been fired. He’s missed too many days.

When she’s tired of writing and the lines of her character analysis of Mercutio are starting to blur into the equations on her algebra worksheet, she goes into the kitchen to find something to eat. Neil’s gone, so she makes herself a ham and cheese sandwich and stands by the sink to eat it. She feels exhausted, and it’s barely afternoon.

Hours later, she wakes up from a nap to the sun near setting and the noises of her mom puttering around the kitchen making dinner. The first thing her gaze lands on is the clunky walkie-talkie sitting on her desk, and her thoughts spring to the boys. Specifically, what Lucas said to her the day before.

Maybe it has more merit than she first gave it. It’s true that she doesn’t get along with Mike at all, but she might be willing to try again at some point, if only to appease Lucas. She had wanted to when they all first met. She liked the other boys just fine, but she could tell from the get-go that Mike was their ringleader and his opinion could sway the others. If she wanted to truly feel like a part of the group, they *all* had to be on board. Even after that, things weren’t so terrible between them; at least until summer and all the drama with El and then everything else that happened. Now, Max’s

headspace is too occupied by other problems to care much about trying to repair her somewhat-friendship with him, and Mike has become more and more reclusive by the day. She even thinks she saw him smoking once, down at the far end of the field, which, although she isn't an expert, she feels is extremely uncharacteristic.

Everything's just weird now. There's too many empty holes in all their lives.

Dinner is mostly quiet; nobody in this house ever says anything that has any true meaning anyway. Maybe it's better this way. Neil ends up on the couch joined by his bottle of whiskey and Max's mom shoos her away after she's cleared the table, so Max retreats back to her room. The silence is almost deafening, and she wishes that dumb walkie-talkie on her desk would crackle. What she wouldn't give for someone to say real words to her.

She considers calling Lucas, but she doesn't want to bother him with her problems when he's supposed to be having fun with his cousins. She also doesn't want Neil to ask who she's calling. In the end, she ends up tidying her room, gathering up all her comic books and folding the clothes she has on the floor before placing them on her chair. The walkie seems like it's calling out to her as she glances at it every five seconds, and then finally lets her frustration out on it by snatching it up and launching it at her bed. She doesn't want to break it, but she did want to throw it. *Why* does she keep looking at it? It's not like anyone's going to call her on it. The only people who might are both out of town.

Her emotions war inside of her. On the one hand, she knows what she wants, what she *needs*. She needs to talk to someone freely so it has to be someone who relates to what she's seen, because being stuck virtually alone inside her house for the next few days until Lucas gets back is going to drive her insane. Unfortunately the only person she can think of is someone she isn't on good terms with, which makes her angry for even having the thought. Is she really desperate enough to potentially embarrass herself?

Damn Lucas for putting the idea in her head. She's sure she never would've considered it on her own. Damn Lucas and his stupid advice, damn Dustin for ever speaking to her that day and getting her

involved in all their mess, and *damn* Mike for hating her from day one.

Damn her for going to talk to him anyway. She sneaks out her window, just as she has done to meet Lucas so many times, except it's after nine and it's dark out. She brings the walkie with her.

On the way, she wonders why she's even doing this. She supposes it would make it easier for Lucas and Dustin when they all hang out together (which is getting rarer every week) if she and Mike aren't constantly at each other's throats about something or other. She also remembers something El said to her on the phone a while ago that she had forgotten about until this very moment. El had heard enough complaints from both of them about each other and was just wishing they would stop fighting. Max had scoffed at it and been about to launch into another rant about just how much of a *jerk* Mike was when El had said she didn't care if they weren't friends, she just wanted them to stop being so mad all the time.

Max kind of agrees with her. Being angry all the time is exhausting, and there are way worse things in her life to be angry about than Mike Wheeler and his dumb attitude. If she can make peace with him, maybe she won't feel so out of place around her own friends. And maybe, if they can get over everything that's happened between them, it'll give her hope that the rest of her life might look up one day, too.

It's only when she gets to his house that she realizes she doesn't know what she wants to say. Maybe it doesn't have to be a whole conversation, maybe just seeing each other for five minutes will give her enough stability to stay in her house until Lucas returns and she can talk to him instead. She just needs to be around someone who knows the things she's been through since she moved here, someone who looks at her and knows why she is the way she is. Her mom can never know and will never understand, and Neil is too scary to ever think about approaching him with anything at all.

She drops her bike in the grass by the back of the house, making her way to the basement door where she knows the boys like to be. He's probably in there still. Her stomach is roiling with nerves, scared that he'll open the door and glare at her like he usually does, but she

remembers there's another way he looks at her sometimes. There are moments at school, when she passes the gym or sees the basketball team, where Max gets overwhelmed at the memories of her dead stepbrother. It's almost like she can smell him, the way he used to get up in her face when he yelled at her and the way he looked when he died apologizing to her. It's moments like that when Dustin and Lucas will be distracted with some petty disagreement that she looks to Mike and his gaze contains solidarity instead of hostility; reassurance that he knows what it feels like to be reminded at every turn of someone you cared about who is gone. He was there, too, and saw Billy sacrifice himself at the last moment just as she did. It's not an image either of them can forget.

It's this that gives her the courage to rap her knuckles on the glass pane of the basement door and wait for an answer. When she waits ten seconds and nothing happens, she frowns and knocks again. He wouldn't know it's her, why would he ignore it?

She pushes her face up to the door again and tries to see inside, her breath fogging against the glass, and then realizes all the lights in the basement are off.

"Shit," she says quietly. She doesn't want to show up at the front door at this time of night. His mom will probably answer and Max doesn't want to explain herself. She wanders around to the front of the house anyway, looking at which lights are on. There's one on the ground floor that flickers and seems like it might be a TV, and there's one on in a room on the second floor. That room has pink wallpaper, though, so Max decides to assume it's not the one she's looking for. The middle upstairs window is dark, and the one on the left has the blinds pulled halfway down, but she spots a familiar figure walking past it in the half second her eyes jump to it. Bingo.

She takes a breath to steel herself before bringing the walkie-talkie out of her jacket pocket and pressing down on the button. "Mike, do you copy? It's Max. Over."

The walkie crackles with static for a few seconds, and then clears up as an answer comes through. "Yeah, I copy. What do you want? Over."



“Can you come outside?”

It crackles again in the silence, and Max thinks that maybe this was insane and she should just go home. Then, “You’re outside?”

The blinds lift all the way up and Max sees Mike’s expression change from confused to surprised, like he didn’t actually believe she was there. In a second, he has the window pulled up too and his head sticking out of it.

“What are you doing here?” He asks, his tone of voice anxious, and Max realizes he probably thinks something horrible has happened. In his head, there’s likely no other reason she of all people would show up at his house at close to ten at night.

“Nothing happened, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she says, glancing away from him above her and noticing she’s standing in front of the front door. This is not a good place to be. “I just- didn’t want to be alone.”

She looks back up to find him staring at her like she’s grown another head. “So you came to me?”

Max huffs and crosses her arms. “Well, there’s no one else to go to!”

“Keep your voice down!” He hisses. “Do you want my mom to hear you?”

She glares. She’s starting to think that this was a bad idea after all.

After a few seconds of mutinous eye contact, Mike puts a hand to his forehead exasperatedly. “Give me a minute, I’ll meet you at the basement door.” He shuts the window and pulls the blinds down without another word, so Max heeds the order and circles back around to where she left her bike. A few moments later, he comes out the door shrugging on a jacket over what looks like-

“Are those Star Wars pyjamas?” She asks, her mouth twisting into a teasing little smile. What does El see in this guy? As far as she knows, Lucas isn’t *this* completely nerdy.

He gives her a flat look. “Why do you have to have a problem with

everything that I do?”

She frowns. “It was just a question. Relax, jeez.”

In response, Mike puts his hands in his pockets and looks at her. “So what do you want to do?”

Max balks for a second, awkwardness taking over her. This is so weird. She’s never willingly chosen to spend any of her time alone with Mike, and now she doesn’t know what to do.

“Um... just- walk around, maybe?”

He shrugs at her answer and starts walking toward the line of trees behind the house, where there’s a little path that leads off to the next street. Max follows quietly, a little moonlight shining down on them, and she thinks that the silence between them doesn’t feel as explosive as it usually does.

Somewhere along the way, after they’ve crossed another street and gone down a path between two houses, Mike takes something shiny out of his pocket and starts playing with it, and Max sees that it’s a lighter.

“What’s that for?” She asks.

“Lighting things up,” he says.

“You smoke?”

“Only sometimes.”

“So what’s it for the other times?”

He looks at her and his eyebrows furrow for a quick second, seemingly surprised that she inferred something about him correctly.

Mike shrugs again. “Sometimes I go out to the woods and set dead leaves on fire one at a time just to watch them burn. It’s weird how something that was alive once can just disintegrate right in front of you.”

Max isn't sure what to say to that, but she offers something anyway. "Sometimes I steal my stepdad's Bowie knife. Use it to stab trees," she says casually. "Sometimes I even carve that I hate him into them."

She's never told Lucas that. Something in her knows that he wouldn't relate, that his way of dealing with his anger is much calmer and reserved, but Mike's admission of low-level violence makes her feel less crazy for her own. Maybe Lucas was right in saying they're more alike than they think they are.

They come out of the trees behind the houses, and the path continues down a hill to a small playground area. There's a swing set that Max sits down on, the cold rubber biting through the fabric of her jeans and making her shiver. The chains creak when Mike sits in the one next to her. He's digging through his pockets for something.

Max is almost surprised when he pulls out a box of cigarettes and plucks one from the pack, lighting it, but given what he'd just told her two minutes ago it's not that shocking. He takes a pull from it and then blows the smoke out into the air slowly.

"You want some?" He asks, turning to her.

She remembers the choking sensation she'd felt that time Billy had offered her a drag from his cigarette, and then her mom's reaction to it.

"Yeah, why not." Maybe if she still smells like smoke tomorrow, her mom will care enough to ask where she's been.

Mike hands it to her and the tips of his fingers are warm. "You've smoked before?"

"Once," Max says.

He nods and watches her, and she tries not to let the hot, ashy air she breathes in make her choke. She holds it for a few seconds and then blows it out, and it makes her feel less nervous than she was before about this whole situation.

The pair of them sit there in the darkness for a few minutes, sharing the cigarette in silence, before Max thinks to ask a question she never

got a real answer for.

“Why do you hate me so much?”

Mike doesn't look at her, sucking in another breath of smoke. “I don't hate you.”

“You sure act like you do.”

“Oh, and you don't?” He says sarcastically, still not looking at her. “If I hated you why would I be here right now?”

“Well, if I hated you, why would I have come talk to you?” She retorts, trying to restrain the irritation she knows is probably written all over her. If she doesn't rein herself in, she knows this is going to go south quicker than she wants it to.

He laughs dryly. “You said it yourself. You only came because there's no one else.”

Max bites back the anger that's trying to rise. He does have a point there, but she's not going to tell him that. He's also not answering her question.

“Fine. Maybe you don't hate me.”

“I don't.”

“What's your problem with me then?”

He hands her the end of the cigarette to finish and grabs onto the chains of the swing, dragging the toes of his Converse through the grass.

“You're always starting shit with me for no reason and it makes me so tired,” he says. “Like, we'd be friends just fine if we didn't argue every other day.”

“And whose fault is that...” Max murmurs under her breath, dropping the cigarette stub to the ground and putting it out with her foot.

Mike turns to her sharply. “Uh, yours? You made El break up with

me! How am I supposed to forget that?"

"I already told you I didn't make her!" Max says loudly. Why is he still on this? As far as Max is aware, they're basically back together anyway so it's not like it made a difference. "And how am I supposed to forget how *shit* you made me feel the first week I was here?"

He looks away again. "I was pretty rude, I'll give you that."

She scoffs. "That's underrating it. You were a total asshole."

He pushes himself forward a little bit and then lets himself swing back. "I guess I never really apologized for that. I do regret it."

Max stays silent and waits for him to continue. He's slumped over in the swing, looking smaller and sadder than she's ever seen him look, and her heart twinges. She recognizes the defeat present in the way his shoulders are hunched, the complete and utter exhaustion at the state of their lives painted on his face. It's what she sees every day when she looks in the mirror.

"It wasn't that I didn't like you, or something," he tells her. "I was jealous that Lucas and Dustin seemed like they were moving on when I was so..."

"Messed up?" She offers.

Mike shrugs. "Yeah. And part of it was out of concern for you, too."

Max furrows her brows in confusion. That's new. "Concern?" She asks, shaking her head slowly. Her hair swings around her face like a curtain, blocking her vision, but she wants to look at Mike and see how he explains this. She tucks it away behind her ear.

"Yeah," he says again. "I could see how fucked up Will was, and I *knew* how fucked up I was. And Dustin and Lucas are good at pretending stuff doesn't affect them but I know it did. It does."

"And?"

"And I didn't want someone new getting mixed up in our shit, okay?" He bursts out, meeting her curious gaze once again. "I didn't want

someone else to have to experience the stuff we did. I thought if I made it obvious that I didn't want you there, you would leave. You know now, but when Lucas told you we couldn't tell you stuff for your own safety it was the truth."

Max thinks about that. She supposes it makes sense. She *has* noticed that Mike tends to be the guy that worries about everyone else's safety, and always wants to get to the bottom of the problem before anyone gets hurt. Lucas is the same and it's something she admires about him, but it's overtly obvious in Mike when he's always the one stressing about coming up with plans. Lucas is a little more go-with-what-the-adults-say.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you," Mike finally says, and his expression is earnest. He's a bad liar anyway, so Max knows that he means it. Speaking of his lies... she has something to apologize for too.

"I'm sorry too," she says. "For judging your relationship too fast."

He makes a weird noise when he registers what she said, almost like a laugh but kind of mad, too. "Yeah, and for making my girlfriend dump me."

Max reaches out towards him and smacks his arm, a spike of irritation fuelling her. "Mike, how many goddamn times do I have to tell you I didn't *make* her?"

"Well, what the hell did you say to her to make her do that?!" He exclaims.

The peace of the previous moment is gone and Max crosses her arms over her chest defensively. "From what she told me, it sounded like you were just lying straight to her face so you didn't have to see her. All I did was tell her that if you did it again, she should dump your ass. You did it to yourself."

Mike throws his arms up. "Hopper made me lie! He told me if I didn't, he wouldn't let me see her anymore. You seriously think I *wouldn't* want to spend time with her? After everything we went through?"

She thinks for a second about the way he'd looked when El had walked back into their lives; the way he had seemed to drop all the negativity he'd been carrying around the second she came through that door. Max remembers thinking *she'd* never been so sure about someone's presence in her life.

He's still on a roll. "What, is that why you've dumped Lucas, like, seven times? You just break up with him the second he does something you don't like without even letting him explain himself?"

Bringing that up is a sore point. Max feels incredibly guilty for the way she's treated Lucas in the past, and she's trying to be better. She'd told him once that she knew she could be a jerk like her stepbrother sometimes, that she was angry just like he was, but that she didn't want to be like him. And then she turned around and behaved exactly like him, manipulating Lucas' reactions and dumping him over and over because she knew he would come back. It made her feel like she was in control, the dominant one, the complete opposite of what she saw in her mother and what she felt in her house every day.

But she had come to a point where she realized that one day, Lucas would get fed up with her. There would come a day when he wouldn't stand for it anymore and he'd leave her permanently, and Max didn't think she could live with that. From then on, she had decided to try harder with him and make things better, to talk about her feelings more. It's always going to be difficult for her, but Lucas is worth it.

"Don't say that like you know anything about why I did that," she says sharply, gripping so tightly onto the chain of the swing that the cold metal feels like ice in her hand.

Mike glares back at her, indignant. "Oh, that's rich! Like you knew anything about me when you said that shit to El!"

Max stands up suddenly. "I'm tired of the lies, Mike! Do you know what it's like to live in a house where your mom will watch your brother get beat up and leave the room so she can pretend it didn't happen? Where she doesn't care where you go or how you feel or what's going on with you because if she doesn't ask, she doesn't have

to lie to herself that it's okay? Where we all just don't talk about anything and pretend it's all fine when it *isn't*?"

She's breathing hard and he's staring up at her with wide eyes, accustomed to her outbursts by now but not like *this*. Max sits back down on the swing, hard.

"I broke up with Lucas a lot because it made me feel like I had control," she admits. "I needed to feel like I was in charge of the situation. I get enough of being treated second-class at home, and I don't want to be like my mom, ever."

She looks back at Mike on the other swing and he doesn't look mad at her anymore, only like he's processing what he's just heard. It lets her own anger drain out of her.

"When El told me what you said, it reminded me of my mom," Max continues. "She seemed so confused on why you would do that and to me it looked like you were just using her when you wanted her and dropping her when you didn't. My mom kind of... disappears into whoever she's dating and just goes along with whatever they do, and it looked like that for me," she finishes.

"I get it," he says, and Max raises her eyebrows. "I mean, I don't get it personally, my parents aren't like that. I just meant I get where you're coming from. It makes sense why you would think that way."

"I didn't want the same thing that happens to my mom to happen to El," Max adds. "She is her own person, and she of all people deserves the chance to be that."

At last, they find common ground. "I agree," Mike replies. "She's been through enough in her life. And I'm happy you and her are friends now," he adds. "Seriously. It was kind of weird to imagine her having girl problems or something and talking to my *sister* about it. I'm glad she has you."

"I'm glad she has you," Max says, and Mike looks shocked to hear her say it. "I might not get why, but I know you make her happy somehow. Even if you do wear Star Wars pyjamas."



“Hey!” He says, offended. “You recognizing it means you’ve seen it too. And I know for a fact you read comics, so you’re just as much of a nerd as me.”

Max shrugs, giving him the point. “At least I can beat you at arcade games.”

“Is that a challenge?” He asks, swinging closer as if to intimidate her.

Max laughs, and it’s a real laugh for the first time in what feels like forever. “You’re on.”

“Tomorrow,” Mike suggests. “Twelve o’clock. I’ll meet you there.”

“Bring painkillers,” she warns him. “You’re gonna need them after I’m done kicking your ass at every. Single. Game.”

“You won’t beat me at Galaga,” he says proudly.

“Wanna bet?”

They stand up and shake hands, and his feels pleasantly warm. It’s a nice change from the frozen chain she was holding onto.

“Loser gets us fries,” Mike adds, and Max agrees to it. As if of one mind, they both turn back up the path they came from.

They’re back across the two streets they crossed and almost all the way back to Mike’s house when Max speaks again.

“So are we good?” She asks. She feels good about having aired out all the conflict she had with him, and he’s had this dumb smile on his face the whole time they’ve been walking back, which she’s choosing to take as a good sign.

“Yeah,” he says, looking at his feet. “We’re good.” He smiles wider.

It brings a small smile to Max’s own face. Having friends feels nice. “Why are you smiling like that?”

He coughs a little, scratching his head. “Just thinking about how happy El will be when she finds out we’re not enemies anymore.”

Max rolls her eyes good-naturedly. "You are so whipped."

He shrugs as if to say, *what can you do?*

"I think Lucas and Dustin will benefit from having us not trying to kill each other every five seconds, too," she says.

"Definitely."

"Although I'll probably still be annoyed by half the things you say."

Mike makes a face like he's not surprised to hear that. "Don't worry about it. You're still annoying, I just like you now. No more *actual* fighting."

"Good," she replies, feeling happier than she has in days as they arrive back in his backyard. She can faintly see her bike lying in the grass.

Mike has the door to the basement halfway open by the time she's sitting on her bike ready to ride away, and at the last second lays a hand on her arm.

"Hey, anytime you need somewhere to go... I'm usually home," he says, looking at her directly. It's a simple thing to say, but she knows what he means by it. He's telling her that he understands that sometimes her house is not a home, and that she's always welcome in his if she needs it.

"Thanks," she responds, and for once she is truly thankful for Mike Wheeler's existence.

"Well, good night," he answers, and awkwardly salutes her out of nowhere.

Max squints at him confusedly for a second. "I'll... see you tomorrow," she says haltingly.

He looks kind of embarrassed and shuts the door quickly, and Max rides off back to her house. That was random.

However, she is looking forward to tomorrow. She has a feeling

Mike's going to be the type of friend she's constantly competing with, ribbing back and forth to see who can be worse just like they usually do, but this time knowing they're both forgiven for their mistakes. It's different from her other friendships for sure, but she thinks it'll be good. Lucas is going to be pleased.

Maybe the wait until Thursday won't be so bad after all.

**Author's Note:**

so what did you think?? PLEASE feel free to leave me long comments and discuss i have so much to say about this pairing